On Being a Teacher:

Reflections on K-12 and College-University Teaching

Wayne Eastman

I’ve taught business law and business ethics to graduate students and undergraduates at Rutgers Business School for a little over twenty years, and I’ve served as a member of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education since 2006. My wife has been a high school English teacher for over ten years.

This piece draws on my experiences and what I’ve learned from my wife and other people. My aim is suggest ways in which those of us in elementary and secondary education and those of us in colleges and universities can fruitfully learn from one another.

I’ll start with three ways in which I think teachers in tertiary education can learn from teachers in primary and secondary education, and then turn to three ways in which I think teachers in the K-12 system can learn from teachers in our college and university system.

First: The K-12 system does well in inculcating in teachers a basic sense of responsibility for how well one’s students learn. We in colleges and universities could learn from that.

If we are going to get college graduation rates in the U.S. to the top in the world again internationally, I believe that professors will have to embrace our identity as teachers more than we have traditionally done. I, no less than my wife teaching British literature to her students, need to see myself as a teacher serving my students, not simply as an academic writing articles for other academics.

Second: Compared to the college-university system, the K-12 system has done well in creating structures under which tenured faculty are evaluated and are expected to be devoted to self-evaluation and self-improvement.

My wife submits annual personal improvement plans, is regularly observed by her department supervisor, and under the recently passed Teach NJ law is subject to real accountability demands, given that she must have satisfactory evaluations or face removal for ineffectiveness. As a tenured university faculty member, I am not subject to comparable structures of accountability. I believe that I should be.

Third: In K-12 education, elected local school boards like the one I serve on do a reasonably good job overall in my judgment in making difficult but necessary tradeoffs between educational need and taxpayer burden. By comparison, the state and federal funders of higher education and parents and students have been much less successful in standing up for economy in spending.
The U.S. is in the upper-middle part of the pack among wealthy nations in the proportion of our national wealth we spend on K-12 education. In higher education spending, on the other hand, we are an outlier at the top end. Much as we who earn our livings in colleges and universities may be wary at the possibility of change, college and university faculty and administrators, along with taxpayers, students, and parents, should all be open to learning from the more economy-oriented governance systems of K-12 education.

Now, the other side of the coin.

First: The college-graduate school system does a very good job overall at involving faculty in governance. It would be a very good thing if primary and secondary education could learn from tertiary education in that regard.

At Rutgers Business School, I and other faculty members play a central role in determining the curriculum and in running programs. It would be desirable in my view if the same were the case in New Jersey K-12 school districts.

There are interesting and tricky issues over whether a major faculty governance role in a K-12 system would go along with typical administrative structures and with typical union contracts as they now exist in New Jersey. But whatever the answer to that and other questions, I believe that enhancing the governance responsibilities and the professional status of elementary school and secondary school teachers is an important and valuable project. In pursuing those key goals, much can be learned from colleges and universities.

Second: American higher education does very well in valuing exceptional intellectual effort and skill in its faculty. We in American K-12 education can learn from that.

Before she became a high school teacher, my wife published an article on teaching philosophy to children. We should aspire to a culture of elementary and secondary education that is structured so as to recognize and value that kind of activity on the part of some teachers.

I believe there are major opportunities for elementary and secondary education in hiring and promoting teachers who are committed to various forms of scholarship alongside their teaching. Such teachers would for the most part not be Ph.D.’s oriented toward writing highly specialized articles for journal publication. Rather, they would be intellectually skilled and hard-working people without Ph.D.’s, as well as Ph.D.’s whose skills are not oriented toward specialized academic journals. Even though such faculty would not likely be a large proportion of all secondary and elementary school teachers, having them become an important and valued part of the K-12 teacher workforce over time is a worthwhile and achievable goal.

Third: The college-graduate school system has done a good job at recognizing the value of a variety of different kinds of teachers and of letting them benefit students without a complex, bureaucratic process of certification. Relatedly, it has done a good job at recognizing the value
of a very wide array of fields, including practical ones like those that predominate in business education and in many community college and graduate school programs. In K-12 education, we can benefit from a spirit of respect for the contributions that can be made by different kinds of faculty, and relatedly from a spirit of respect for “heart”/people skills and “hands”/technical skills as well as “brain”/verbal-analytical skills.

In my department of Supply Chain Management and Marketing, I work closely with instructors and part-time lecturers whose close connections to business are critical in getting our undergraduates and MBA students jobs. Primary and secondary schools could benefit from the example of higher education to move toward a more varied group of faculty than we have now, including part-timers with jobs in business and other sectors. Such a diverse faculty could help move the K-12 system away from an obsolete factory model toward a more flexible model that respects the reality that our students need to be prepared for jobs in which people skills and often technical skills, not simply verbal-analytical skills, are highly important.

As a Rutgers faculty member, a South Orange-Maplewood school board member, and the spouse of a public school teacher, I am very proud of both the public college-university sector and the K-12 public education sector in New Jersey.

At the same time, I believe that both sectors can benefit from reforms. But for those reforms to work, they cannot simply be the brainchild of outsiders to education. We in the inside are the key to successful reform.

When people outside education tell us that we in education need to emulate the private sector, it leads too readily to a polarized, politicized debate in which teachers become defensive and close ranks against change.

By comparison, I’m optimistic about the prospects for teachers in the college-university sector and in the K-12 sector drawing on positive features of the other sector as a basis for reforming our own sector.

I believe it’s important for those of us who teach in primary and secondary schools and those of us who teach in colleges and universities to see ourselves as part of a single unified profession.

If we who are college and university faculty look down on K-12 faculty as lower and as apart from us, shame on us. If we who are K-12 faculty disdain college and university faculty as airy snobs who are alien to us, our bad.

Whether in relation to the specific areas discussed here or in other areas, teachers in K-12 education and in college-graduate school education have a great deal to offer one another.

Let’s get together. Let’s start talking to each other and listening to each other. Let’s start seeing ourselves as part of a single great team and a single great profession.
The positions expressed in this piece are personal. They are not positions of my employer, Rutgers Business School-Newark and New Brunswick, or of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education on which I serve.